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ABSTRACT

A case study about collaborative learning and collaborative writing examined what was taking place in classroom writing response groups. The study revealed how problematic college writing groups can be good for students. On the basis of observation and interviews with participants in three groups composed of undergraduates at a large state university in the northeast, three criteria emerged that students used to evaluate their groups: (1) the ways in which authority and leadership were exercised both in the class and in the group; (2) the degree to which their need to feel an important and valued part of the group was met; and (3) perhaps most significantly, the way in which their individual, conflicting, and generally unrealistic expectations of the class were not met. (KEH)

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Fictions Juxtaposed: A Tale of Three Groups

by Margaret Tebo-Messina

In The Making of Knowledge in Composition, North has written of ethnography that "Its power as a mode of inquiry, and hence the authority of the knowledge it produces, derives from its ability to keep one imaginative universe bumping into another" (284). As a phenomenological researcher who uses ethnographic techniques, or to be more accurate--as a quasi-ethnographer--today I hope to do some universe bumping, perhaps by colliding with the way in which you perceive writing-groups, but--more deliberately--by telling you how the students in each of three writing groups assessed their experience. Because of time constraints, I am not going to tell you how task-conscious these groups were, or how dutiful, or even how they talked about writing. I am not going to illustrate any of the ways in which they appeared to be GOOD groups to their teachers. But I hope you will take my word for it: you would have thought them good groups. What I hope to do instead is surprise you with a brief look at the way in which the students evaluated the group experience.

But first, some background on the research from which these stories are drawn. It came about because I wanted to know what was going on in those response groups in my

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writing classroom. And despite all that Moffett, Bruffee, Elbow, Macrorie, Hawkins, George, Nunn, Danis and Gere--and all the others--could tell me about how to run groups or to cure ailing groups, or about how groups stayed on task or how they talked or how they aided revision, there was nothing in the literature of composition-- or group dynamics, by the way--that could tell me what college writing groups were like for students. I decided to find out for myself by doing phenomenological research in other teachers' workshops. When there--in those other classrooms--I become a regular participant in a student group--regular in that I am there for each meeting, but a peculiar-participant in that I do not contribute any writing or take part in the conversation. I use ethnographic techniques to gather information--audio taping all conversations, keeping an observational notebook, collecting all written work, interviewing group members and teachers, and eventually confirming my interpretation of events with the students. What I wind up with is best called a Case Study, or to borrow Goetz and LeCompte's term--a quasi-ethnography--because my focus is limited to those few hours when the class is in session and because I do not "use the interpretive, conceptual, and theoretical frameworks of cultural anthropology" (Goetz and LeCompte 18).

The three groups I am going to tell you a little about today were composed of undergraduates at a large state university in the northeast. Over a year's time I observed

them in required non-graded--Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory graded--writing courses in two different teacher's workshops. I was unknown to each class until their teacher introduced me as a researcher--swearing to hide everyone's true identity-- who wanted to know how writing groups work. When groups were formed, I joined the one that I happened to be sitting closest to; and each of them quickly became comfortable with my miniature tape recorder and silent note taking. Perhaps the most significant proof of their acceptance is the ease with which they engaged in teacher bashing or in complaints about assignments in my presence. In interviews, they also complained about one another. Few of these complaints ever appeared in their class evaluations: another indication that I was privy to an inside view of how they assessed their groups.

The first group, composed of three females and one male--all freshmen--enjoyed their workshop for nine out of the fourteen weeks they were together. According to them group work was a "fun way to spend the semester." They were relaxed though dutiful about the work that was required of them, but concentrated more on getting to know one another than on any of their weekly essays. After four sessions of introductory work, the class routine was established: Monday nights were spent discussing assigned readings or current social issues intended to be writing prompts. Topics, however, were never assigned, and my group always chose to write about personal things--about their homes, boyfriends,

dorm life or vacations. On Wednesday nights the students responded to each other's essays in groups. Although the students had several conferences with the teacher about their writing, they never received any written evaluative response from her until late in the term. The Wednesday night--in the ninth week--when they got those essays back, their positive attitude about the class changed. They found fault with everything: The teacher was to blame for their inability to remember directions--they always had to ask for clarification; the teacher--I'll call her Ms. Hill--was to blame for not telling them what she wanted them to write; the teacher was to blame because they had not critiqued each other's work sufficiently; the teacher was to blame because they had not learned how to write "good essays," etc. etc.

What precipitated all of this fault-finding? Ms. Hill's comments on Beth's boyfriend essay--comments that are perhaps best summarized by her written "Why should we be interested in Kevin?" Beth was infuriated by the teacher's response, and the entire group took up her cause:

> A. We loved that [essay].
>
> Beth. I know, you guys--that was like the essay you guys liked the best. But I tried--I didn't just, like write about his good points.
>
> C. Why shouldn't we be interested in Kevin? We Are!
>
> Beth. I know.

C. Who is she to say? We had to write to our workshop right? And we do. And we care!

Beth. Obnoxious thing! I am like furious.

A. I'm sorry but that's really unfair--because--The thing is I don't understand--O.K.-- Why didn't she in the beginning when we said 'What exactly do you mean?' Remember? Like the first Class? When we said 'What exactly do you mean by write an essay?' She said anything you want. . . .

C. She was downright rude. I could kill her.

A. Kill her....let's all.

Ms. Hill, who I am happy to say is still alive, thought this group one of the best in the class not only because they did all the required assignments, but because she believed they were active learners who had developed a "certain fluency." The group, however, was unanimous in thinking the semester a waste of time. While they enjoyed the social aspects of the group format, they insisted they had learned nothing from one another, and to prove it they referred to this incident. The confrontation with Ms.Hill's written evaluation confirmed their belief that they did not know how to write "good essays" but that as an authority, she did and wasn't telling them.

The student assessment of groups two and three is neither as unanimous nor as negative. Both these groups were part of Ms. Jones' "Practical Writing" 309. Because she was concerned that some students were having a hard time

working together, she created new groups half way through the semester by placing students of equal ability and motivation together.

The first group I joined was composed of three females, one of whom was a returning student in her late 20s. They were together for only six class meetings, but that was long enough for two of the females to develop strong antipathies to the group. Barbara (the older student) was frustrated by what she considered the immaturity of the younger women; in contrast, Becky resented Barbara's "know-it-all attitude"; and the third participant praised the group--because "it was just, ahhhh, it was just fun being with all girls."

This group engaged in a variety of writing assignments ranging from biographical pieces to a collaborative report. They received written feedback from the teacher on each assignment and were required to revise several times after having discussed ideas with their group. This need for peer feedback was one source of conflict: to Becky it seemed that her personal essays as well as her revision ideas were put down and patronized by Barbara. In a private interview Becky said,

> I find Barbara to be a little snobby or something like that. I found her to be really--like--a lot of the times to say things that are really snobby--like put other people down, like put me down or somethin cause she's an adult student. I mean, I just don't like her attitude towards me.

Although Becky was never openly hostile to Barbara, she did most of her talking to the third member of the group with whom she worked easily.

Barbara's negative assessment of the group was based on her belief that the other two students wasted time, ignored her requests for revision ideas, and "don't know what to do and don't care." When the group worked on a collaborative writing assignment that required them to devise and administer a questionnaire, and then to write a formal report on their findings, Barbara complained to me,

> I'm getting so tired of working in groups . . . here we have 10 minutes to get it done and they're like 'Well, you know, my boyfriend said...' And I feel, I ALWAYS feel like I have to be the--you know--'It's O.K. Come On! Come On!' I don't know if it's . . . my personality or if it's that they defer to me because they know I'm older. They do defer to me . . . but they get off. You know, like we're supposed to give ideas for revision and they'll sit there and go 'Well I don't know how to rewrite this.'

Despite Barbara's lament, the group's report and questionnaire were judged one of the best both by the teacher and the class. This did not, however, alter either Barbara or Becky's assessment of the group. It was a failure for Barbara because it was not task-conscious enough, and for Becky because it was too task-conscious: or

conversely, it failed for Barbara because too much time was spent on interpersonal--or in the terminology of group dynamics-- on the group's process needs, and it failed for Becky because not enough attention was paid to process needs.

The last group also failed in some ways for three of its four members, despite the fact they all rated it the best group in the class--best in terms of creativity and writing ability, not, however, the best in terms of meeting their individual criterion for success. For Barbara--I chose to follow her to her second group because she was so willing to talk to me--the group (and the class) failed because she had not learned the grammar and punctuation rules that concerned her; but also because she resented the way in which Cherie had emerged as the group's leader. Whereas, Barbara found her first group not sufficiently task oriented, she found Cherie too concerned with the task: "It was like she didn't trust us to do it!"

And what did Cherie think about all this? She was the only member to rate the group an unqualified success:

> we just worked together great, I thought. I thought our group was really really good and everybody was conscientious and . . . everybody was nice and got along and nobody had any hangups or anything, ya Know?

Cherie 's resented leadership had come about when she was the only one prepared to do a collaborative writing assignment. After weeks of sharing the responsibility for

tasks as well as leadership of the group, the others failed to bring in their drafts and so they welcomed hers. What they did not like was the way she directed the completion of the assignment.

Katie too had problems with Cherie's leadership because she felt ignored by her, and that was just one more reason to believe she was not a part of the group.

> I knew that I could have done something. I could have come in with something done and said, 'This is it.' And I could have worked hours on it, and could have been really good. And they would have accepted me into their intellectual group. Because it was, I think it was the best group in the class as far as just ability, you know.

Despite the group's superiority, Katie told me that she had not learned anything about writing; all the group taught her was what it was like to be a follower and an outsider, and she thought that was a "valuable" learning experience.

Matt , however, found little of value in the group: not only had his writing not improved but he had not become comfortable in pointing out errors to other students. As an English major and a future high school teacher, Matt was confident about his writing but not about his upcoming student teaching. In addition, he, like Katie, also claimed not to feel a part of the group:

> I don't know where I fit in the group. A lot of times I felt myself sitting back and just watching what they were doing.

Matt was the only male in a group of what he termed "very intelligent" females and the only one besides Cherie that was not troubled by her leadership. He, in fact, identified with her as someone who worked the same way he did. Matt assessed the group experience on the basis of how it met his writing/criticizing goals, as well as his personal needs.

I would like to be able to wrap this up by presenting you with an elegant summary of how all students evaluate their writing groups but that, of course, is not really possible. Writing Groups, like all groups, are too idiosyncratic, too complex, too human to be reduced to a few generalizations on the basis of three case studies. However, I can point out three criteria that these students used to evaluate their groups:

1. the way in which authority and leadership were exercised both in the class and in the group.
2. the degree to which their need to feel an important and valued part of the group was met.
3. and perhaps most significantly, the way in which their individual, conflicting, and generally unrealistic expectations of the class were not met.

In conclusion, I think the lesson to be learned form the troubled experience of these three <u>good</u> groups is how difficult collaborative learning and collaborative writing

can be for our students. If we really hope to empower learners with this pedagogy than we need to give groups support, encouragement, and instructions in how groups should function. AND we also need to articulate our expectations for the class.

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